

# Parenting Exceptional Children

A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, adhd, and other neurodivergent children.

**John Sharry**

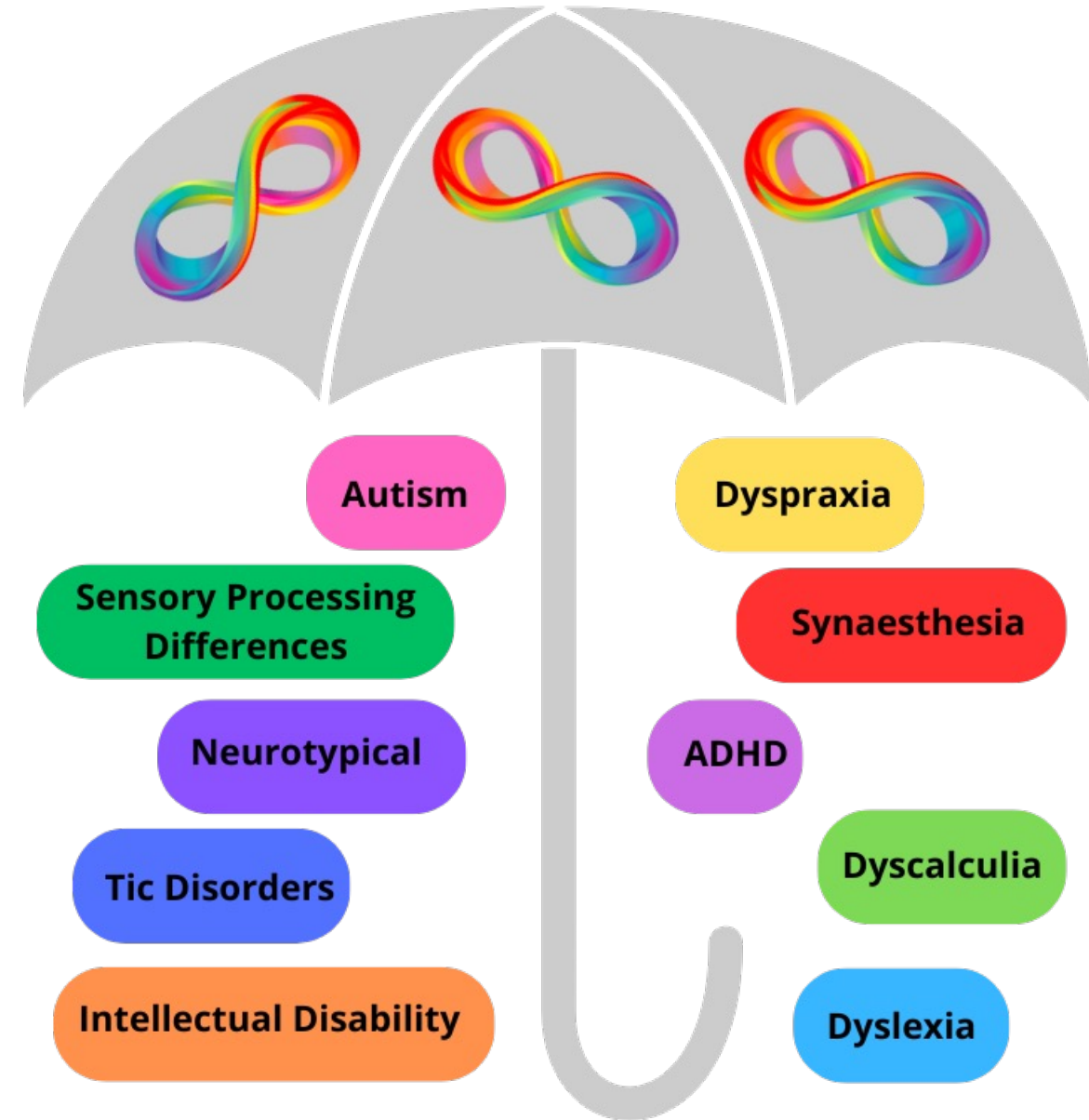
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# Embracing Neurodiversity

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- About 20% of all children are neurodivergent (ND).
- The majority do not have a formal diagnosis.
- Great overlap between ND conditions.
- Many ND children meet the criteria for more than one. For example, an estimated 50% to 70% of children with autism also meet the criteria for ADHD.



# A Neurodiversity Affirming, Strengths-Based Approach

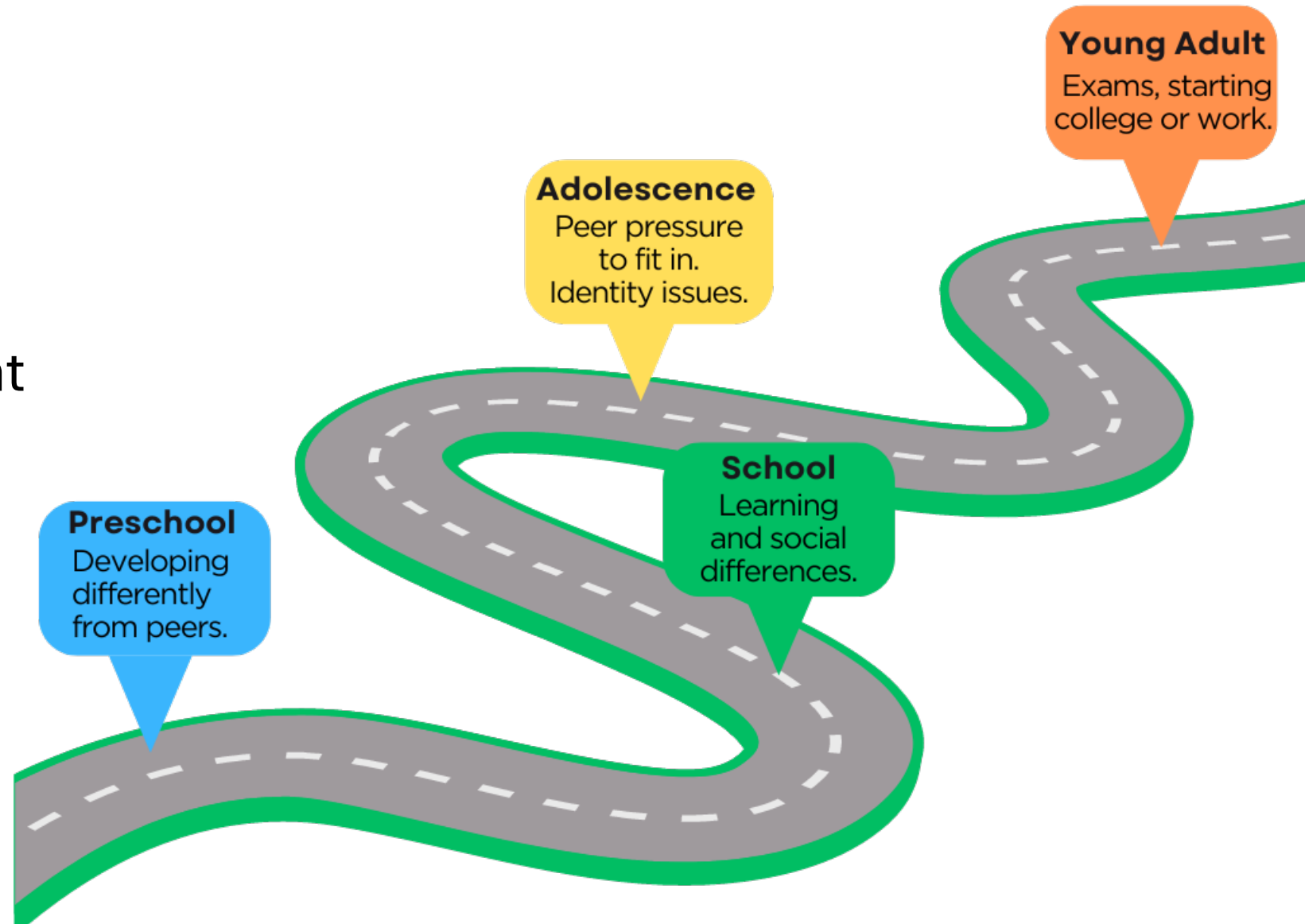
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- A shift away from pathologising autism, adhd and other ND conditions.
- Neurodivergence comes with strengths as well as challenges.
- Embracing neurodiversity as beneficial for humankind.
- Recognition that ND people experience discrimination.
- Providing appropriate accomadations to ND people to meet their needs.

# The Parent Journey

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Raising a neurodivergent child can feel like a journey with many milestones...





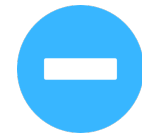
# Seeking Professional Help and Diagnosis

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## Advantages of Diagnosis

- Can clarify your child's needs.
- Necessary to gain many supports (e.g. SNA) treatments (e.g. medication for ADHD).
- May give you and your child a positive way to understand.
- May increase access to supports.
- Growing positive identity around some diagnoses.



## Disadvantages of Diagnosis

- Long waiting lists.
- May be a pathological process.
- Mixed professional expertise.
- Some neuro-affirming profiles not recognised (e.g. PDA).
- You and your child may disagree with diagnosis.
- May be more useful to focus on your child's needs rather than their label.
- Child may not have consented to process.

# Seeking Professional Help and Diagnosis

- You don't need a diagnosis to gain **self-understanding** and to reach out for **support**.
- Seek diagnosis when your child **needs** it.
- Seek **neuro-affirming** professionals and services.
- Learn from experience of **neurodivergent adults**.
- Focus on getting the right **supports** for you and your child.

# Understanding Your Child

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As a parent, the most important thing you can do is to understand your child.

- Appreciate their strengths.
- Compassionately understand their challenges.



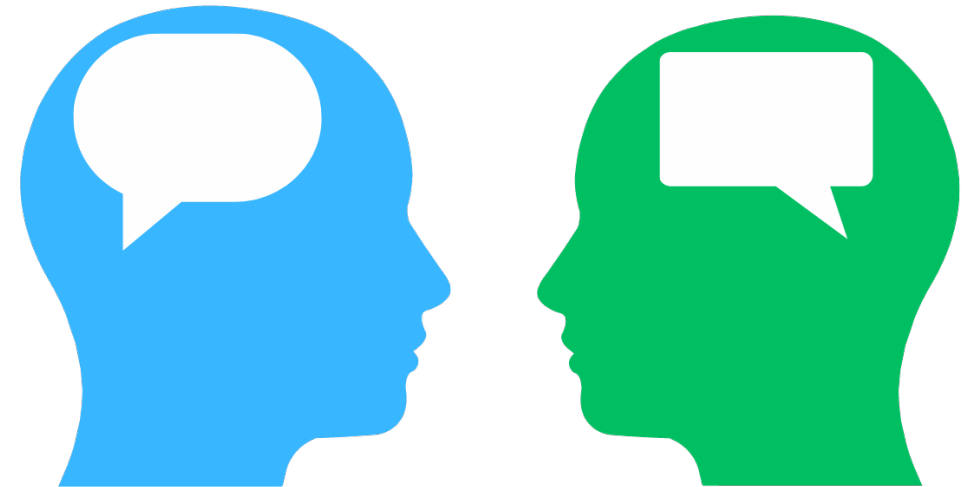


# Double Empathy Challenge

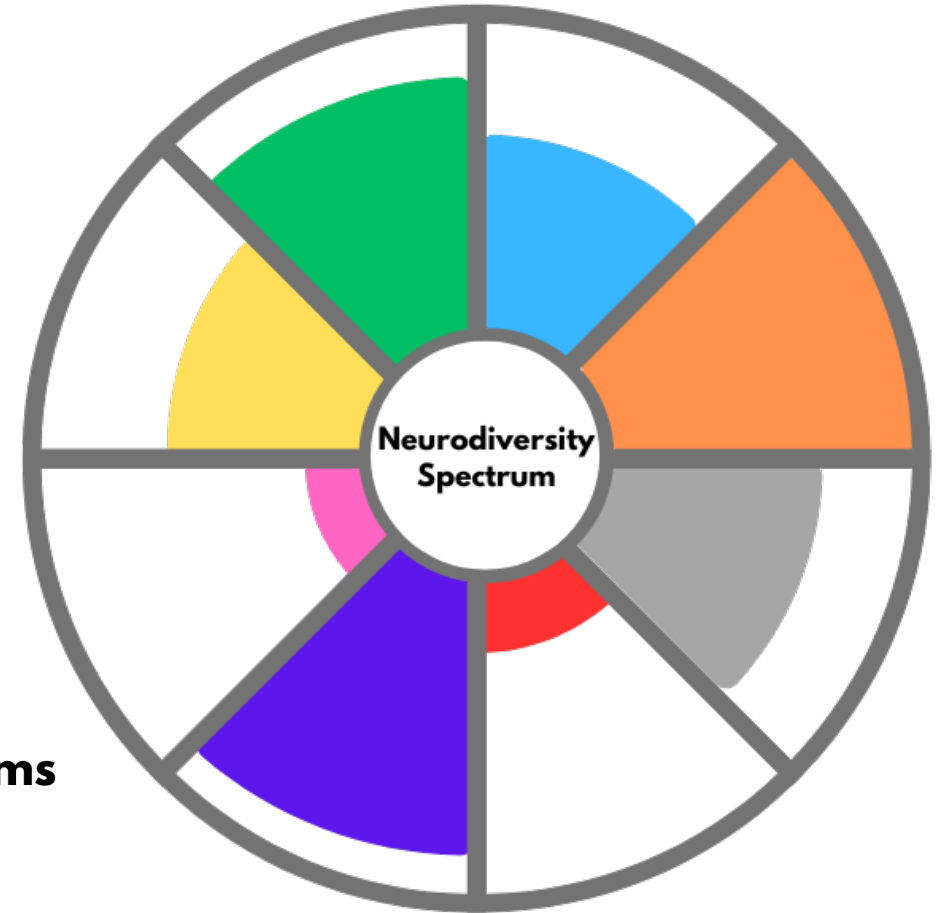
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**It is more difficult to understand someone who feels and thinks differently to us.**

- Neurodivergent people can find it hard to understand neurotypical people and vice versa.
- Two Neurodivergent people can also find it hard to understand one another if 'neurodivergently' different.



# A Spectrum of Needs











 **Communication and Social**       **Sensory Differences**

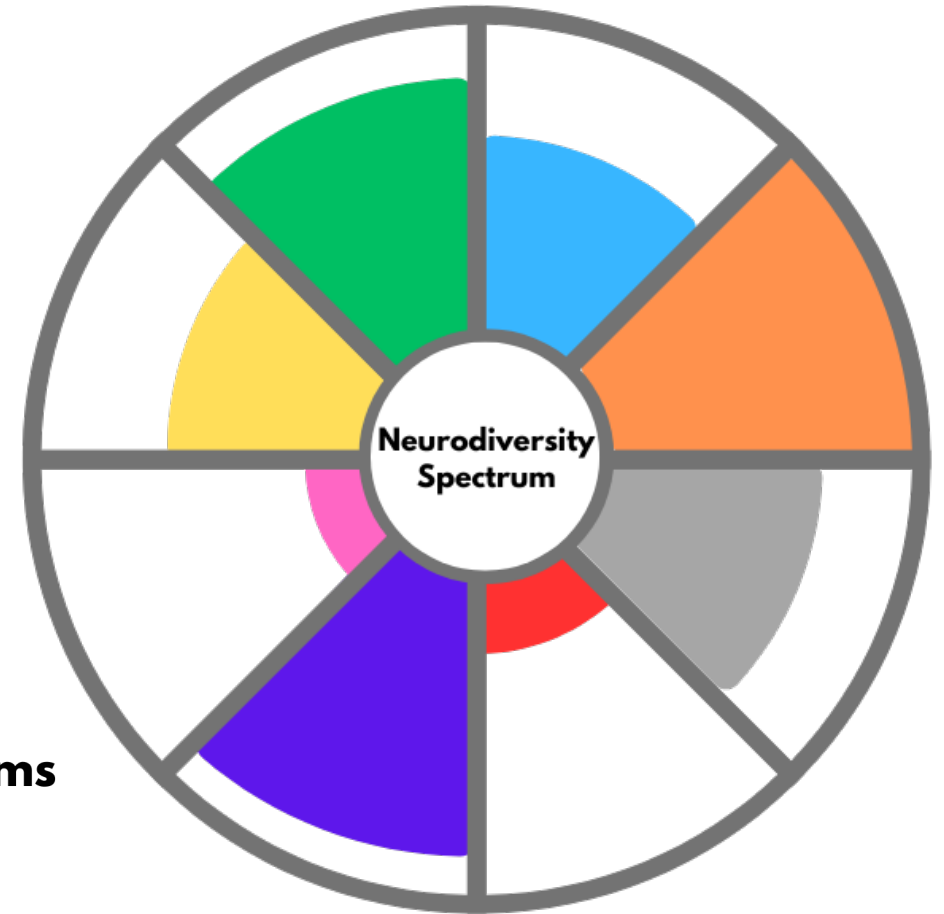
 **Executive Function**       **Repetitions/Tics/Stims**

 **Attention and Interests**       **Emotional Processing**

 **Impulsivity and Energy**       **Health and Physical**

# A Spectrum of Needs

-  **Communication and Social**
-  **Executive Function**
-  **Attention and Interests**
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-  **Sensory Differences**
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# Tuning In To Your Child's Sensory World

Much behaviour can be explained by trying to avoid unpleasant or agitating sensory experiences. Seek out energising, relaxing, or enjoyable sensory experiences.

Julie finds **tags** and **seams** on clothes intensely irritating.

Peter sleeps better when he uses a **heavy blanket** and **night light**.

Joe needs to keep his hands active when studying . Using a **fidget spinner** or a **squeeze ball** helps.

Light touches make Aoife flinch. She prefers **deeper hugs**.

Grace has a strong aversion to the **smells** in certain **food shops** and can feel sick.

Going swimming is a nightmare for Dan. He hates being **damp** and **cold** in the changing room.

# Many Neurodivergent **Strengths** Flow From Having a Unique Sensory World...

Robert is attuned to **sounds in nature** and can distinguish various bird calls.

Darragh loves cooking. He can discern **flavours and tastes**. It's a wonderful sensory experience for him.

Painting is Sarah's passion. Her **unique perception of colour** and texture allows her to really express herself.

Roisín enjoys herbal tea. She can distinguish between dozens of different types.

# How Many Senses Are There?

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There are the five external senses:

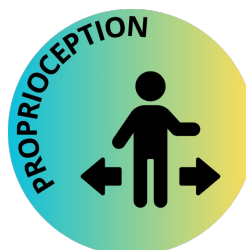


There are also three internal senses:



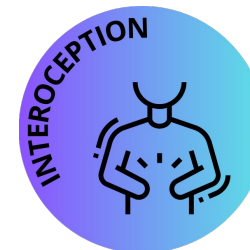
## Vestibular (Balance)

This allows us to notice any change in position or movement of the head. It helps us maintain our balance.



## Proprioceptive (Movement)

This tells us where our body is in space. It allows us to judge what force and pressure is needed to carry out tasks.



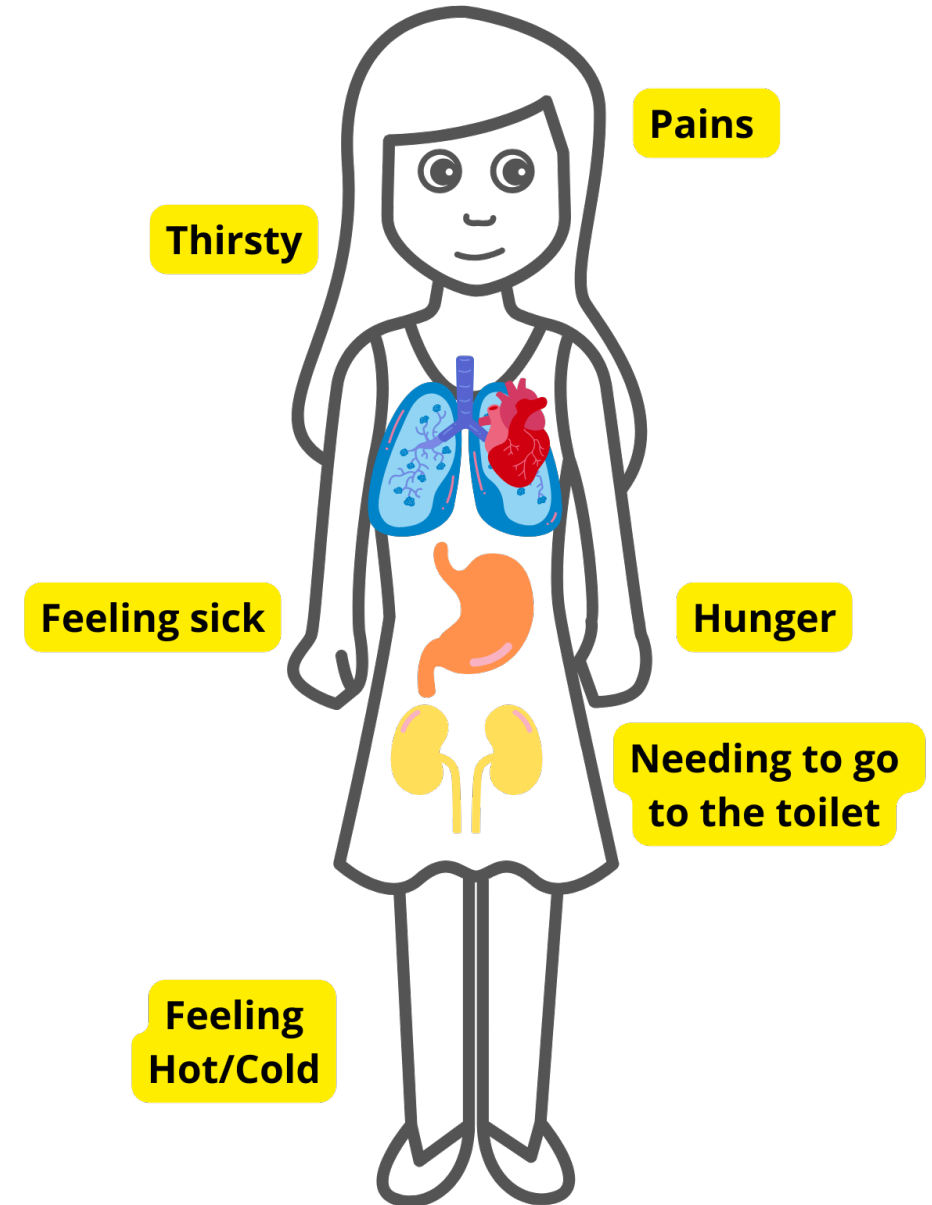
## Interoceptive (Internal Feelings)

This allows us to feel what is happening inside our bodies (hunger, pain) and to notice our emotional states.

# Interoception: The most important sense?

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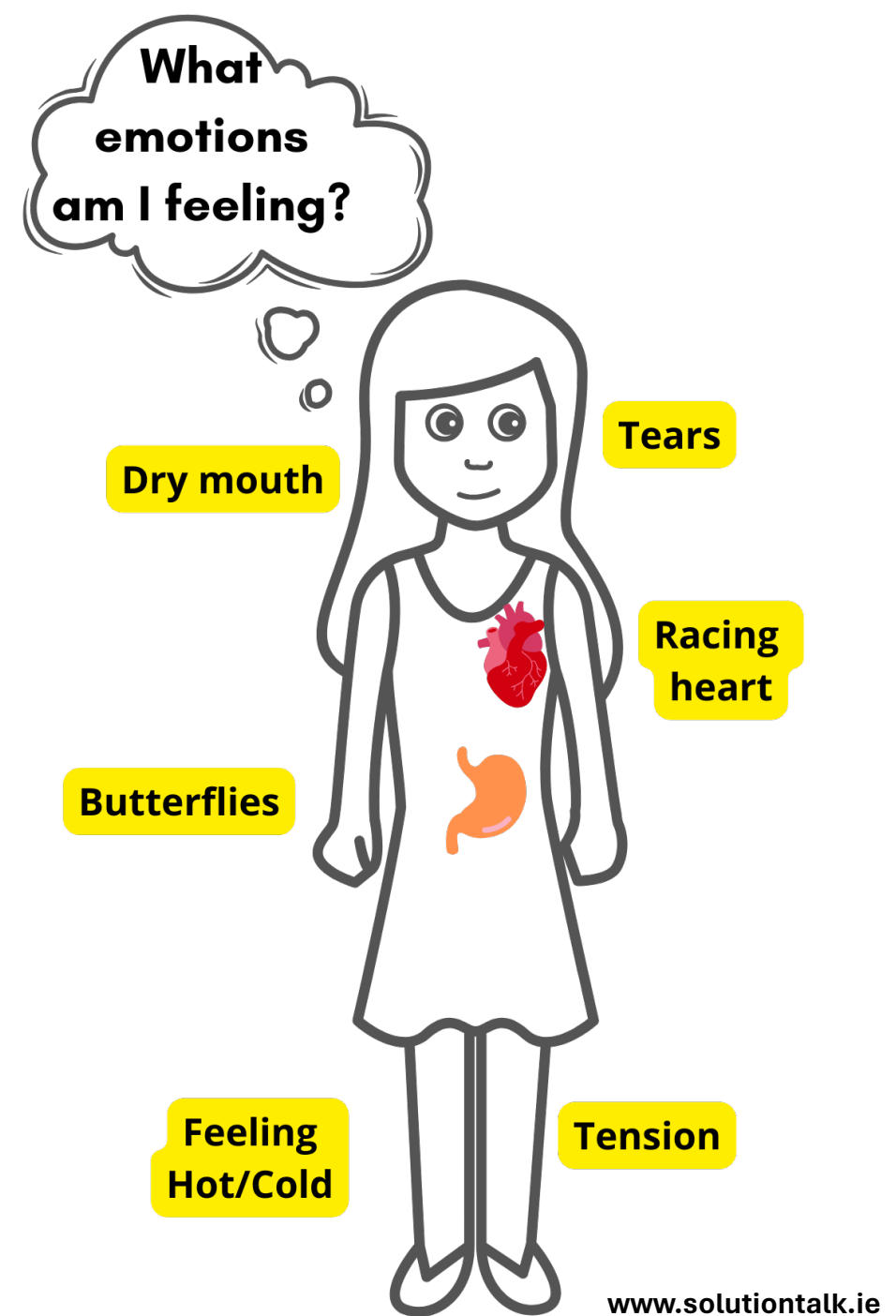
- Many neurodivergent children are hyper- or hypo-sensitive to their **internal body states**. e.g. temperature, hunger, pain.



# Interoception and Emotions

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- Many neurodivergent children experience emotional states differently in their body. e.g. anger or sadness.
- May name and express feelings differently.
- May express empathy differently.





# Sensory Regulation

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- **Relaxing and rebalancing** the sensory system, especially when **over-stimulated** or **agitated**.
- **Energising** the sensory system when you are **under-responsive** or **need to focus**.

## Sensory regulation is:



**Stimming** – sensory habits  
e.g. pacing, hand rubbing,  
hair twirling.



**Rest and relaxation**  
or **exercise and movement**.



Engaging in **passions**  
and **special interests**.



**Positive sensory**  
experiences.

*What works for each person is different, Find out what works for your child.*

# Reflective Exercise

## Reflective Exercise 3 - Your Child's Sensory World

<b>For You:</b>	<b>Your Child:</b>
When you are <b>stressed</b> or <b>agitated</b> how does it show in <b>your body</b> ?	When your child is <b>stressed</b> or <b>agitated</b> how does it show in <b>their body</b> ?
What helps you <b>relax your body</b> when you are stressed?	What helps your child <b>relax their body</b> when they are stressed?
How do you like to be <b>touched</b> when you are <b>upset</b> ?	How does your child like to be <b>touched</b> when <b>upset</b> ?
What is your <b>favourite sensory experience</b> that you really enjoy?	What is <b>your child's favourite sensory experience</b> that they really enjoy?

# Neurodiversity and the Family

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- Neurodivergent children are much more likely to have neurodivergent parents, siblings or extended family.



# The Importance of Connection

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Good parenting is primarily about establishing warm connected relationships and this is no different for neurodivergent children.



You want your child to feel:

- **understood, affirmed** and **loved** by you.
- **listened to** and that they can **communicate** with you about anything.
- that you are their **ally**, on their side and there for them no matter what.
- that you are a **safe** person for them.

# Blocks to Communication

**ND children frequently experience blocks to connected relationships with their parents.**

- Sometimes, children are so stressed by sensory overload, school and outside world that this leads to challenging meltdowns at home.
- Sometimes parent feels hurt by child's behaviour or get angry in response.
- Sometimes, child communicates differently or has different passions to their parent.
- Sometimes, parents feel their role is to correct their child's different behaviours which sets you up as a critical parent.

# Daily Moments

- What do you **enjoy doing most** with your children?
- When do you have the **best chats**?
- When do you **connect** most to your child?

# Creating Connected Relationship

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- Making sure you have **daily connecting times** when you enjoy each other's company.
- Learning to **pause** and reduce the times you communicate negatively to your children.
- Make it your priority to **connect**.
- Adjust your expectations. Let go of pressures and prioritise your **relationship**.



# Building Unique Connections

- **Join in an activity that your child really enjoys** - playing games, shopping, penalties, craft.
- **Take an interest in one of your child's passions** - video games, music, films, craft, sport.
- **Let your child teach you** - video games, a craft, dance, hairstyle.
- **Teach them something they want to learn** - cooking, magic trick, make-up, grow food, skim stones.
- **Learn something new together** - attend a course, watch videos, read books together or in parallel.
- **Go somewhere together** - visit a friend, relative, go for a meal, sporting event on a walk together.
- **Build rituals** - daily crosswords, bedtime reading, daily cycle.
- **Plan family projects that interest them** - design/repair/build/decorate together.
- **Go on a day-long adventure** - camp out, hike, fishing.



# Homework

- Prioritise the times you **already enjoy** with your child. Be more available at these times.
- Try to identify **one new way to connect** with your child.
- Build a **'map' of your child's needs**. You can use the worksheet in the handout.

# Developing a Positive Self-Identity



Think something is **wrong** with you.

Feel **weird** or **different**.

**Isolated** from people.

**Depressed**.

**Self-critical** *'What is the matter with me?'*

Trying hard **to fit in**.

**People pleasing**. *Going along with others.*

**Anxious**.



Aware of your **strengths**.



Love being **unique**.



Find your own **community**.



**Happy** with yourself.



**Self-compassionate** *'What are my needs?'*



Finding people who **accept you**.



Setting your own **boundaries**. *Doing your own thing.*



At **peace**.